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# The Peach State XPress

News and Views from

## The Georgia Association of Railroad Passengers, Inc.

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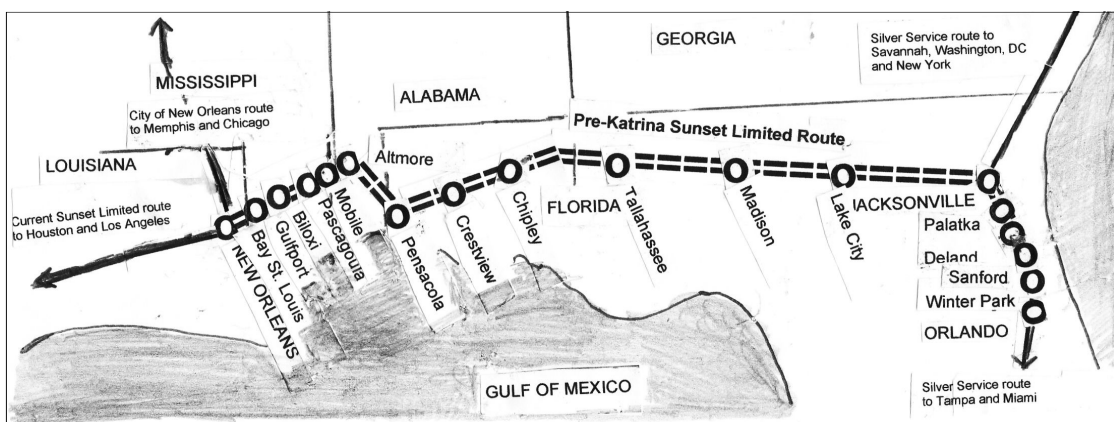
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### NARP: REINSTATE GULF COAST SERVICE IMMEDIATELY

Now that Amtrak has sent Congress a report on options for reinstating Gulf Coast train service, the National Association of Railroad Passengers is demanding immediate action. Amtrak suspended service on the eastern leg of its Los Angeles-Orlando, FL Sunset Limited route during Hurricane Katrina four years ago. Since then, there has been no Amtrak service of any kind between New Orleans and Jacksonville, a line that formerly included four stops in Mississippi, two in Alabama and six in northern Florida (three of them frequently used by passengers from southern Georgia). Amtrak says it would take 20 months and \$32.7 million to resume Sunset Limited service all the way to Orlando, but NARP says those figures are inflated. NARP also says that if Congress approves Amtrak's full funding request for Fiscal 2010, Amtrak will be able to afford the estimated annual operating cost of the restored route: \$4.8 million. NARP wants Congress and the US Department of Transportation to order Amtrak to extend the Sunset route to Orlando immediately. In the longer run, NARP also wants to add a second train on the New Orleans-Florida line, by extending the Chicago-New Orleans route of the City of New Orleans.



**THERE'S A WILL; IS THERE A WAY?** Amtrak says it's received a strong response from manufacturers interested in building its next generation of long-distance railcars. Representatives from such well-known companies as Alstom, Kawasaki, Nippon Sharyo and Bombardier attended a recent meeting in Florida to discuss Amtrak's requirements. Amtrak hopes to award a contract next May for a 130-car order that would include new diners and additional sleepers for its eastern trains, including three trains serving Georgia: the Crescent, the Silver Star and the Silver Meteor. The big question right now: will Amtrak get enough funding to pay for these cars? In its Fiscal 2010 budget request, it asked Congress for \$1.383 billion for capital projects and debt service. The House of Representatives wants to cut that figure to \$930 million, and the Senate Appropriations Committee has proposed \$1.002 billion. It's unclear what the final figure will be, but the National Association of Railroad Passengers warns that under some scenarios, there may be no money "for anything beyond maintaining the existing operation."

**THE HIGH-SPEED RAIL SWEEPSTAKES.** Virginia and North Carolina continue to take the lead in efforts to develop a Southeastern high-speed passenger rail corridor. Virginia has submitted a formal application for \$75 million in federal economic stimulus funds to build a third track along an 11.4-mile stretch of the CSX Railroad. North Carolina has applied for \$76 million to make track improvements from the Virginia border to Raleigh. Both projects are along a proposed high-speed rail route that would stretch from Washington, DC through Georgia to Florida. Earlier this summer, Georgia submitted a pre-application stating its intention to apply for high-speed rail money, but as of this writing, there's no indication it followed up. The first grant announcements are expected in mid-October.

**COMMUTER RAIL CLOCK TICKING.** When Georgia talks about seeking federal money for passenger rail, there's a profound irony. Years ago, Congress offered Georgia \$87 million to help establish a commuter rail line between Atlanta, Griffin and Macon, but since Georgia has never agreed to provide operating funds, that money has gone unclaimed. As previously reported in the Peach State XPress, Congressional leaders are getting tired of waiting for Georgia to act, and they may soon rescind the offer. The State Transporta-

tion Board recently directed its staff to apply for a new federal commuter rail grant, but with the question of operating funds still unresolved, approval seems highly unlikely. Atlanta Regional Commission Executive Director Chick Krautler and Georgia Department of Transportation Intermodal Division Director Erik Steavens have been talking with local officials in cities along the line, and Steavens says he hopes to resolve the issue of operating funds by the end of the year. The question remains: would that be soon enough to retain the \$87 million?

**MARTA: LESS SERVICE, MORE WORRIES.** The Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority reduced service last month and it will raise fares next month, and that could be just the beginning. MARTA faces a severe financial crisis not of its own making, but as a result of the current recession. 70% of MARTA's revenue comes from a two-county one-cent sales tax, and after the economy tanked, revenue from that tax plunged, blowing a huge hole in MARTA's budget. The Atlanta Regional Commission used \$25 million in federal economic stimulus funds to plug part of that hole this year. To help plug the rest of it, MARTA reduced service on Aug. 15. Several bus routes were eliminated. And although the MARTA Board found a way to keep trains running until 1 AM, it was forced to reduce frequencies. Rush-hour trains now operate every 10 minutes on the east-west line and every 12 minutes on the north-south line. Early morning, midday and early evening trains now operate on 15-minute headways. And late evening trains -- after 9 PM -- now operate on 20-minute headways. The basic MARTA fare will rise 25 cents on Oct. 1 to \$2, and other fares will rise accordingly. But unfortunately, this may not be the end of the belt-tightening. Even though the recession is now showing signs of easing, Georgia State University experts predict that MARTA sales tax revenues will continue to drop through fiscal 2011. Fiscal 2010 begins next June 1, and it could be a very ugly year. MARTA will have to get by on \$277.1 million in projected tax revenues, down \$65.5 million from the peak in 2008, before the recession hit. Stung by General Assembly indifference to its financial challenges earlier this year, MARTA plans to hire outside lobbyists to argue its case during next year's legislative session.

**COMPROMISING COMPROMISE?** Of the 50 states, Georgia is 49th in per capita transportation spending. The last two sessions of the Georgia General Assembly have seen competing proposals to increase funding: one calling for a one-cent statewide sales tax, the other calling for one-cent regional sales taxes. The two sides fought each other to a standstill. Now legislative leaders are talking about a plan to split the difference with a compromise combining a half-cent statewide tax with a half-cent regional tax. Reaction is mixed. Many observers worry that road projects would get all the statewide tax revenue and a large part of the regional tax revenue, leaving very little for public transportation.

**STEEP LEARNING CURVES.** After years of waiting in vain for Gov. Sonny Perdue to exercise some leadership, many public transportation advocates are already looking ahead toward next year's gubernatorial race. But judging from some recent comments, the announced candidates face a steep learning curve. Instead of looking at commuter rail and expanded MARTA transit, Republican John Oxendine seems to think that building a new freeway through Atlanta's east side might be the solution to the region's traffic congestion. Another Republican candidate, State Sen. Eric Johnson, told the Macon Telegraph that commuter rail would be "OK" if it improves traffic flow. But then he added that commuter trains would probably need their own dedicated tracks (he's apparently unaware that most commuter trains share tracks with freight trains). Then there's former Gov. Roy Barnes, who's seeking the Democratic nomination. He's a transit supporter, but he suggested running light-rail trains on elevated tracks above interstate highways. Commenting on [Saportareport.com](http://Saportareport.com), Atlanta journalist Maria Saporta says that would be waste of money. "Running light-rail on existing streets either with a dedicated right-of-way or shared lane is far less expensive and much quicker to implement," she argued. Saporta added that running trains above interstate highways "would not encourage the development of walkable town centers served by transit." It's unfortunate that Atlanta Regional Commission Chairman Sam Olens decided against running for governor. Writing in Business to Business magazine, the Cobb County Republican wrote, "The issue of mobility, especially when it comes to rail, is critical to the business and economic success of metro Atlanta. We can't build enough roads to serve the 3 million folks who will join our community in the next 30 or so years. Rail connections within our region, our state and our larger megaregion are essential."

**THE INTERNATIONAL.** In western Canada, the newest addition to Vancouver's Sky Train rapid transit system has opened three months ahead of schedule; the 16-station line links downtown Vancouver with suburban Richmond and Vancouver International Airport... After a three-day strike by locomotive engineers, Canada's VIA Rail offered 60% discounts to passengers for future train travel, and the response nearly overwhelmed VIA's reservation system... Virgin Atlantic Airways has announced an e-ticketing agreement with Eurostar, which runs the "Chunnel" trains linking England, France and Belgium... In a bid to replace short-haul flights with high-speed trains, Britain is making plans for a 200-mph route linking London with Birmingham and Liverpool in England, and eventually with Scotland... British commuter rail fares will drop in January, as the result of a government policy linking those fares to retail prices, which have been falling... British authorities are prosecuting a 29-year-old man who disrupted service on East London's Docklands Light Railway by climbing on a bridge and threatening to commit suicide.

**NATIONAL LIMITED.** Amtrak service between Seattle and Vancouver, BC has increased following the addition of a second-round trip last month; the new train is an extension of a Cascade run linking Portland and Seattle, meaning that passengers can now travel between Portland and Vancouver without changing trains... Amtrak celebrated the 25th anniversary of its Chicago-Grand Rapids Pere Marquette last month, but with Michigan facing severe financial problems, budget cuts could jeopardize that train and another state-funded Amtrak train, the Chicago-Port Huron Blue Water; about two dozen Michigan train advocates turned out for a "save our trains" rally in Lansing... California will spend \$13.1 million to renovate 66 bi-level railcars used on state-funded Amtrak trains... A new study puts a \$15 billion price tag on a plan to establish passenger rail service between Denver and the Vail, CO area... Spotsylvania County, VA will join the Virginia Railway Ex-

press commuter rail district.. Virginia Railway Express is using federal stimulus funds to order 12 new commuter rail locomotives... New Mexico's Rail Runner commuter trains now run seven days a week... Connecticut's Shore Line East commuter rail line will be extended to New London later this year... Minnesota's new Northstar commuter rail line is scheduled to begin operations Nov. 16... Because of growing ridership, platforms on the Hiawatha light-rail line in Minneapolis-St. Paul are being expanded to handle three-car trains... The Federal Transit Administration has given Houston METRO permission to start final design work on two new light-rail lines, the North and Southeast lines... Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley has endorsed light-rail over bus rapid transit for a new transit line in suburban Washington, DC linking Bethesda and New Carrollton; state officials also favor light-rail for a new Baltimore line... The Chicago Transit Authority will seek funding to extend its Red, Yellow and Orange heavy-rail lines... Seattle light-rail passengers can use their tickets to get discounts at coffee houses, cafes and boutiques near light-rail stops... Following last year's deadly commuter train accident in Chatham, Southern California's Metrolink has decided to ask Amtrak to replace Connex as its commuter train operator... Citing security concerns during the G-20 Economic Summit in Pittsburgh, Amtrak has suspended service to the Steel City from Sept. 24 to Sept. 26... Computer-savvy passengers can now use Google Transit to plan Amtrak trips.

**DIXIE FLYER.** North Carolina has passed legislation that will allow the creation of regional transit tax districts (Tennessee has a similar law)... Virginia's first state-funded Amtrak train will begin running between Lynchburg and Washington, DC on Oct. 1, offering through service without a change in cars all the way to Boston; the northbound trip will leave Lynchburg at 7:38 AM, and the southbound trip will terminate there at 8:30 PM... A non-profit group is raising money to renovate the Amtrak station in Yemassee, SC, a stop for Amtrak's Silver Meteor and Palmetto... Amtrak has installed a new information kiosk for Crescent passengers at its Anniston, AL, station... Louisiana has dropped a plan to seek federal stimulus funds to establish New Orleans-Baton Rouge passenger train service; media reports suggested that Gov. Bobby Jindal was afraid such a request would hurt his chances to win the next Republican Presidential nomination... Florida is seeking federal stimulus money for Orlando's proposed commuter rail system.

**THE GEORGIAN.** US Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood is scheduled to speak in Atlanta Sept. 21, at an Atlanta Regional Commission forum, "Transportation in the 21st Century"... With Atlanta's mayoral election approaching, Citizens for Progressive Transit and several other groups will sponsor a candidate forum on transportation issues from 6 to 8 PM on Sept. 29, at All Saints Episcopal Church, 634 W. Peachtree Street... The Georgia House Transportation Committee has voted to approve Todd Long's appointment as Director of Transportation Planning, a new post the legislature created earlier this year... Georgia State Rep. Jay Roberts (R-Ocilla) is the new House Transportation Committee Chairman, replacing Vance Smith, who resigned to become State Transportation Commissioner... After just one year on the job, Steve Farrow has resigned from the State Transportation Board; former State Rep. Stacey Reece of Gainesville wants to replace him... Georgiatransitconnector.com is the new web site for the Atlanta streetcar project; Atlanta is seeking \$300,000 in federal stimulus funds for the project, but city council member Anne Fauver criticized it in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, arguing that the streetcar has a low priority in the city's Connect Atlanta transportation plan... Former Georgia Transportation Commissioner Wayne Shackelford is dead at the age of 75: after leaving GDOT, he became an outspoken supporter of commuter rail... Alan Kieper is dead at the age of 81; as MARTA's general manager between 1972 and 1982, he oversaw the construction and opening of MARTA's rail system.

**THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GARP.** Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce Transportation Vice President Chuck Meadows will be a special guest at this month's GARP meeting... Thanks to Frank Rambo, Rick and Julie Clarke, Steve Vogel, Dick Wise and Dick Hodges for staffing the GARP booth at this year's Southeastern Railroadiana Show... GARP's Vinnie Kelly recently returned from a family trip to Washington, DC on Amtrak's Crescent; he says he was "impressed by the efficiency of the train and the staff."

**NEXT MEETING:** Saturday, September 12, 10 AM

**PLACE:** Towne Square Condominiums Club Room, 225 East Ponce De Leon Avenue, Downtown Decatur, between Church St. and North Candler St., 1/2 block from the Decatur MARTA station. Building entrance is beside the Subway sandwich shop

**PARKING:** is available on the streets and elsewhere. If you park in a metered space, feed the meter - the City says they are checked on Saturday. Parking in the Towne Center deck IS NOT FREE.